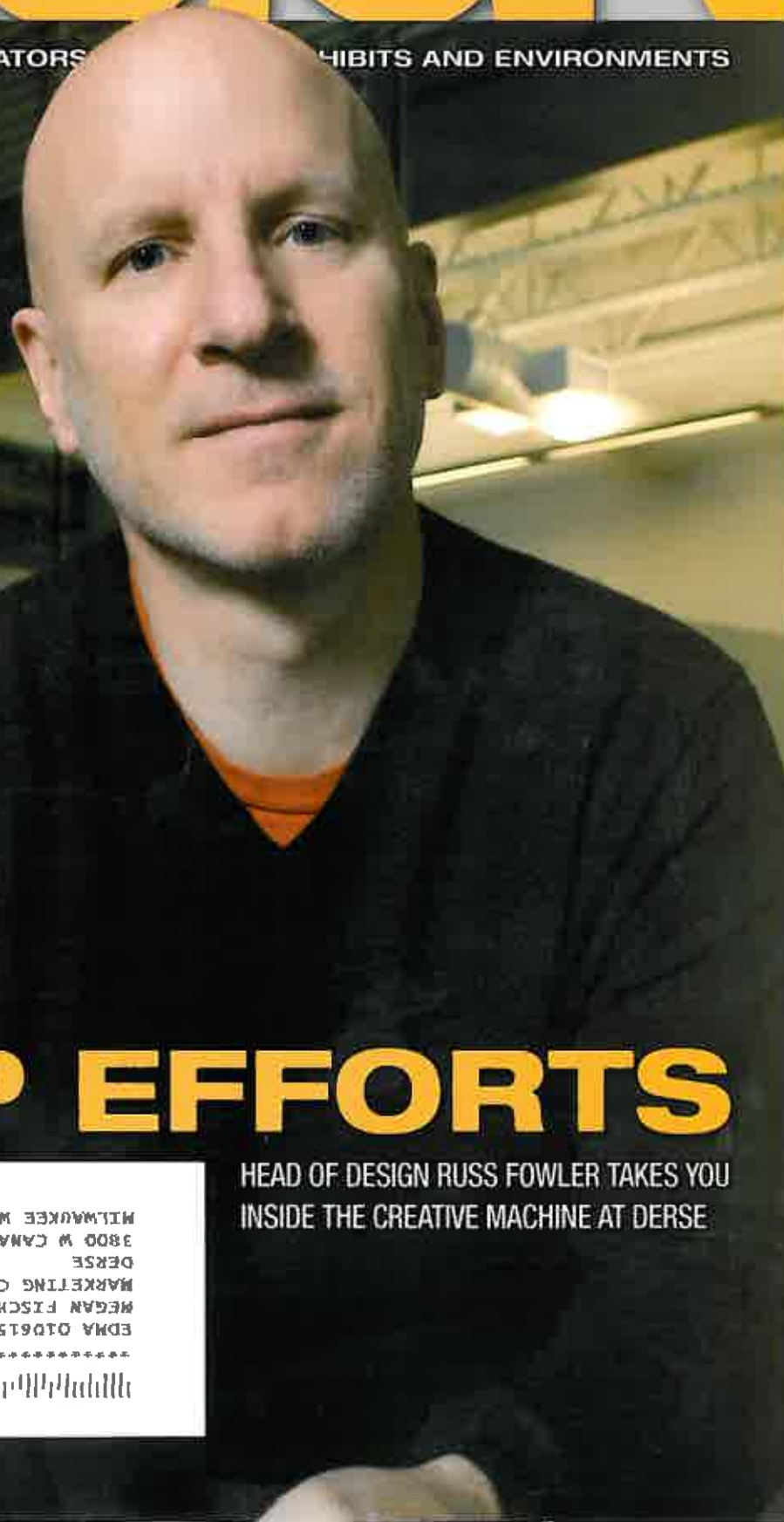


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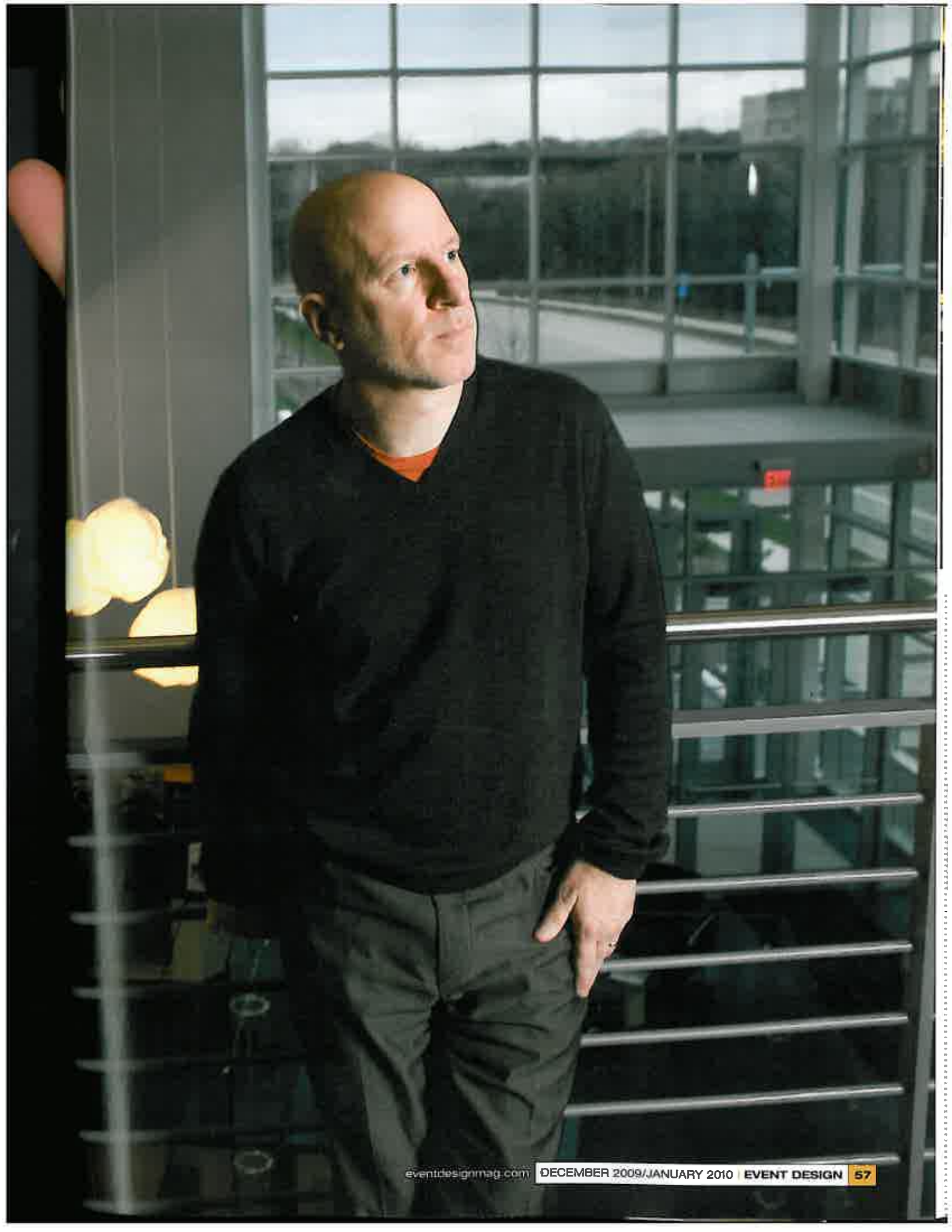
GROUP EFFORTS

HEAD OF DESIGN RUSS FOWLER TAKES YOU
INSIDE THE CREATIVE MACHINE AT DERSE

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DERSE'S **RUSS FOWLER** ON WHAT MAKES A STRONG DESIGN DEPARTMENT IN 2010 AND BEYOND



The evolution is undeniable. During the past 15 years, Derse has evolved from a modest regional exhibit company into an industry powerhouse. One of the key factors contributing to Derse's growth and success is its design team—and the creative leadership of Russ Fowler.

When Fowler joined Derse in Milwaukee as national creative director in 1994, the company had three offices and its product was exhibit architecture. At that time, Fowler headed a team of just three exhibit designers—including himself.

Fast forward to 2010. Derse now employs 30 designers located in seven offices across the country. The product is face-to-face marketing: exhibits, events, briefing centers—domestic and international—all designed from the standpoint of identity and function to support engagement and brand experience. The Derse design team employs 3D designers, museum designers, graphic designers, and experiential designers. They've built a communications platform that facilitates inter-office collaboration. They've added structure and procedures that have enhanced efficiency. And they've become a formidable opponent that consistently scores projects coveted by the competition.

So how does Fowler keep a team of 30 designers spread across the country on the same page? Good question.

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Looking back, it seems inevitable that Fowler would end up working in exhibit design. First, he earned a degree in environmental design from Bowling Green State University in Ohio—which actually included an exhibit project or two in the curriculum. Then, one of his first post-graduate jobs was for a company in Los Angeles that was already highly computerized in 1984. (To put this in perspective, Apple introduced its first Macintosh that year—the one with virtually no memory and a tiny screen.)

"I was an early adapter and that helped open some doors," says Fowler. Two years later, armed with experience in both environmental design and computers, Fowler took his first exhibit design job. In 1994 he took the design helm at Derse.

TEAM APPROACH

Although each designer on the Derse team makes valuable contributions, Fowler says that what really matters is the team. "Is there a lead designer? Absolutely, but it's a group who does this," he says. Fowler demonstrates how strongly he feels about focusing on the team rather than on individual designers through his actions. He has nixed suggestions that Derse brand its individual designers and opts not to name individual designers when the company enters its work in design competitions.

Derse manages its design talent and its designers' workloads through a system that leverages both designers who work for its individual divisions and designers who work for corporate. Each division office has its own creative director responsible for that division's creative needs. However, when specialty talent is required, the workload exceeds capacity, or a project is beyond the size or scope of what the division team can handle alone, the corporate creative group supplies additional manpower.

Fowler, who personally directs the corporate creative group, describes the corporate group as a sort of flex-team that houses both specialty talent and designers experienced with large and sophisticated projects. By utilizing the corporate talent pool, the individual divisions can expand as necessary, staffing projects



Creating an environment of camaraderie and cooperation between designers is a key component to Derse's success.

with teams chosen based on each project's specific requirements. The system enables Derse to share talent while minimizing overhead. "We didn't need all of those specialties all of the time in any of the divisions, but they needed to be there when the resources were needed," says Fowler.

In addition to providing specialty talent, the corporate creative group takes the helm on multi-million dollar projects that smaller offices don't have the resources to tackle. "If a four million dollar project came into a division that only has two designers—that would absolutely swamp them. So we drive the large projects," says Fowler.

Responsibility is a key ingredient in the Derse design formula. A project director (which could be Fowler) is assigned to

every project run through the corporate creative group, and that director takes full responsibility for the management and direction of the project team. "It's somebody who is focused on that project; coordinating everybody so the whole team stays in tune with the objectives and meets all timeframes," says Fowler. This system enables Derse to disperse responsibility in a way that ensures no single designer is overloaded and every project gets the quality and quantity of attention it requires.

Fowler says Derse works to maintain an atmosphere of camaraderie and cooperation between its designers. This means actively creating procedures aimed at eliminating turf wars. One of the ways the team tries to eliminate territorialism—or team members feeling stepped on—is that the divisional designers get



An exhibit for Sub-Zero pushed the envelope—the huge mahogany table served as an incredible centerpiece for the footprint.

Show attendees could pick up demo cameras and shoot for themselves in the corner of Nikon's booth.



first right of refusal on every project generated by their division. "They have the ability to say, 'I want to take ownership with this,'" says Fowler.

The designers take this decision very seriously because committing means taking full responsibility for the project. Thus, the designers are very conscious about their workloads and only take ownership when they know they can commit wholly to a project. When someone's workload is too heavy to do justice to a project, they release ownership to someone else in their unit or corporate creative group.

Sometimes on large projects, a divisional team will opt to relinquish directorship, but still participate on the project team. Likewise, when the workload is light, the divisions keep their projects. "It's really helped to alleviate a lot of egos and overwork," says Fowler. And when the economy turned sour, the divisions were able to keep more of their work so it was really the corporate group that felt the effects of the recession first.

NATURAL SELECTION

The Derse design team is diverse in background and experience. This means designers under 30 create along-side designers who have been around since the '70s. And designers who can draw and hand sketch quickly sit next to champion computer jockeys. "It's blending and mixing," says Fowler; a technique that enables Derse to bring both experience and fresh perspective to its projects.

When it comes to new hires, Fowler has developed a line of questions he integrates into interviews—questions that indicate whether a designer is an individual or a team player. Specifically, he asks the candidate to describe how a concept in his or her portfolio was developed. "There are some key words that come out of that. Part is 'I,' or 'we,'" says Fowler. He reasons that unless a designer worked at a very small company, it's rare that a single person was solely responsible for large project. So Fowler listens to the candidate's language and makes a determination from there as to whether the candidate is better suited toward working in a group or working independently.

Once a designer is on board, Fowler says it's apparent pretty quickly whether they belong or not. He says Derse tries to identify good talent and nurture it by placing new designers on

FOCUS ON CORE COMPETENCY

For the past four years, Russ Fowler's duties have focused on creative. At Fowler's request, the administrative and personnel duties that many design directors contend with were reassigned to someone else, enabling Fowler to focus on what he does best—direct design.

Fowler still does the annual reviews for the members of the design team, but much of the responsibility for hiring and firing has shifted to the HR department. Responsibility for tracking the status of various projects—and the assignments of the individual designers—has been decentralized. Divisional creative directors manage divisional schedules, then report back to a design administrator in the corporate office who compiles and distributes a master schedule. "Our system allows a connectivity of all of our resources without me being that connector," says Fowler.

He sees this separation between creative and administration as a tremendous asset. "When you get too heavy of a diet of administration and HR stuff, it really dilutes the product you're trying to create," says Fowler. With the ability to focus squarely on design—coming up with the face-to-face engagement solutions and environments—Fowler says he's been able to create better product.

teams with experienced designers. "We have one designer who's an absolute star now, but I think if he'd been given projects to work on by himself [rather than placed on teams] he'd have developed completely differently," says Fowler.

Fowler also tries to involve young designers in the monster projects. "They get exposed to the biggest, most complex, coolest projects. Then, when they're working on mid-sized projects, they know what the model is and can make it work," says Fowler.

ESTABLISHED PROCESS

Fowler says that after studying agency and other business models, Derse decided it was important to define its creative process. A document it developed defines the multi-step path a project takes through the company—without dictating how designers should design.

A key step in the Derse process is information gathering. The designers gather some of their own information, which is then supplemented by an in-house research staff. The research staff delves deep into the audience, industry, and competitors. "We become fundamentally smarter, but our designers don't have to take time away from designing to get the information," says Fowler.

Another step is a strategy meeting where the project approach is defined. This is when the project director is assigned and the creative team is selected. Conceptualization

commences once all of these preparatory steps are completed.

While concepts are being developed, the team works together to critique the work and improve it. Fowler says one of the qualities that makes a strong design team is when the team members are comfortable with giving each other constructive criticism—and receiving it in return. "When I'm working on a project, I ask for feedback. That breaks down a barrier which makes it easier for them to have a future conversation with me about one of their projects," says Fowler.

Derse designers often gather for these critiques—similar to the way design students critique each others' work. Fowler says few companies do this sort of critique, but he's found that it helps to improve the quality of the design. "[The project] needs to be talked about critically, with the objective to improve it—and with time enough where you can still change it," he says.

Finally, the group puts together a presentation geared toward communicating the team's thinking. The team assesses the story and how that story should be told with an eye toward making sure the audience will get it. "You have to be able to communicate that story in a way that strangers are going to understand, and that's not an easy thing," says Fowler. The team rehearses, practices, and works at it until they have it down.

Post-presentation, the team usually receives feedback from the client and responds with adjustments and a second presentation. And once the project goes into production, the team stays involved to ensure that what was presented to the client was exactly what gets delivered.

OUTREACH



Six times a year—plus whenever he's in New York for business—you'll find Russ Fowler at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. For the past three years, he has taught the masterclass "Graduate Exhibition Design - Design and Presentation Techniques." Fowler, who loves teaching, says that what he takes away from the students makes the trip from Milwaukee more than worth the effort. "It's fun—the



students see things differently than we did—they're smarter, brighter and more connected to information and background and research—and their concepts and designs show it," he says.

Plus, there's a benefit. The relationship gives the young designers a good impression of Derse—which certainly helps when it's time to recruit.



Annual creative conferences keep designers in all of Derse's remote offices on the same page.

INTEROFFICE CONNECTIONS

Derse has set up its offices to facilitate working remotely. "We're very comfortable having brainstorming conference calls," says Fowler. He says it takes a certain dynamic for a person to work remotely, but when it works, it works. The ability to communicate without being face-to-face is growing increasingly important, because more and more often the team is being asked to present remotely. Currently, the company is working on some tools that will allow team members to collaborate differently and more visually from remote locations, which will make the process even more efficient.

Derse keeps its designers on track with one another by hosting an annual creative conference. Odd years, the creative directors meet to discuss best practices in process, procedure, concepts, and presentations. Even years, the entire design staff gets together for several days. During the conference, the team designs projects together, brainstorms, and learns to feed off of one another. "We're working with each other constantly, but we're not all at the same location. At some point you want to be able to sit down and have a meal together—get to know each other," says Fowler. Having that connectivity strengthens the team.

Fowler also uses the conferences to hone presentation skills. The designers make presentations to the group and receive feedback. "Practice and observation are the best learning tool. You have to be able to feel comfortable in your skin and learn how

other people are presenting," says Fowler. At one conference Fowler made a presentation himself—from a remote location—demonstrating how tools like labels and arrows (devices that lead the audience's eye to the things you would point to if you were in the room) can enhance understanding.

Between major conferences, there are monthly creative director calls and occasionally one of the designers tours the offices to present a specific educational topic. Fowler himself is often the "teacher," sharing best practices knowledge on new ways to visualize and communicate—with one another and with clients.

THE FINAL SUMMATION

After the project is complete, the Derse design team takes things full circle, evaluating the success of each project. "We're trying to get beyond "The client really liked it," by setting up measurable, quantifiable objectives," says Fowler.

Fowler says watching the designers develop is extremely satisfying. He even compares it to the feelings of pride he experiences as a parent of college-age triplets. And when a project sells, everyone celebrates. "We have a bell that has been part of the Derse culture for 25 years. When we win a project, we ring it. The sound goes through the whole building," says Fowler.

When corporate design has worked on a project with another office, they get that office on speaker phone to share the ringing of the bell. Says Fowler, "The buzz becomes infectious." ■